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Employment inches in right direction At 7 percent, jobless rate is second lowest in state

By Josh Adams • THE TENNESSEAN • October 5, 2010

An unemployment rate of 7 percent may not seem like a blessing, but the labor pool in Williamson County continues to fare better than in other parts of the state.

Updated unemployment statistics released by the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development show, comparatively, workers here are more likely to be collecting a paycheck than almost anywhere else in the state. Only Lincoln County has a lower unemployment rate at 6.4 percent.

"Compared to how the economy is doing across the state and nationally, Williamson County has been pretty fortunate," said Matt Largen, director of the county's economic development office.

According to preliminary figures for August, released by the state in late September, the national and state unemployment rate stands at 9.6 percent. Five years ago this month, Williamson County's unemployment rate of 3.2 percent was the lowest in the state.

The good news is that the unemployment rate appears headed in the right direction. Since the same time last year, Tennessee has trimmed more than a percentage point off its unemployment rate. The shift in Williamson County isn't as dramatic, but unemployment has dropped nearly a point from 7.9 percent in August 2009.

Unemployment dropped year-over-year in all Tennessee counties except Maury, Montgomery and Scott.

Maury still hit hard

In Maury County, 14.5 percent of workers were without jobs in August. That figure is up 2.1 percentage points from the same time last year.

Spring Hill, which straddles Maury and Williamson counties along Interstate 65, had an unemployment rate of 9.5 percent in August, according to the state. That figure is up from 8.9 percent from the previous year. The city made a little headway from July, however, when the rate was 9.8 percent.

Out-of-work laborers looking for manufacturing jobs in Williamson County may have more opportunities in the coming years. Largen said he's interested in recruiting more production facilities to the county to help balance the explosion of office employers over the past decade. He said he's talking with 10 companies that are considering relocating to the area and has another eight companies on the radar, though no discussions are under way.

Largen said that while his office is extremely busy now, only two weeks ago the phones were barely ringing. There is still a lot of fluctuation in the economy, he said, and it's difficult to spot trends.

"Until they land and make the announcement and start hiring the people, it's hard to make that a trend," Largen said.

Each of the businesses he's tracking would combine a manufacturing center with its headquarters, which Largen said is a "definite trend."